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# Back to the Future of the Great Plains

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# Historical Commentary

## Back to the Future of the Great Plains

by Frederick C. Luebke

Americans have never really known what to do with the Great Plains. The future of this huge area stretching from Texas to Montana—roughly 20 percent of the contiguous forty-eight states—has been debated for more than a century, even before the term “Great Plains” itself had come into common usage. In 1878, for example, John Wesley Powell argued in his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions of the United States* that fundamental changes had to be made in the American land system in order to bring government policy into conformity with environmental realities in the Great Plains and other parts of the American West.

Since then many other books, articles, and reports have been published on the same theme and have made the same general point. They range from *The Future of the Great Plains* (1936), published by a commission of the federal government, to the widely publicized article of 1987 in which

Deborah and Frank Popper of Rutgers University in New Jersey proposed that large portions of the plains be returned to a vast buffalo preserve under federal government sponsorship.<sup>1</sup>

The Popper essay, combined with the centennial celebrations of Montana, Wyoming, and both Dakotas, has stimulated a flurry of articles in the media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and scores of local and regional newspapers, all focusing on the plight of the plains.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Ian Frazier’s impressionistic best-seller, *Great Plains* (1989), has brought even more attention to the region and its problems.<sup>3</sup> Once again the American public is back to old questions about the future of the Great Plains.

What, in the first place, is the problem? To answer that let’s go back to essentials. The Great Plains is a vast grassland—mostly flat,

semi-arid, and treeless—located in the middle of a continent where physiographic forces are powerful and ecological balances are delicate.

What a society *can do* in this or any other natural environment is largely limited by its resources. In the Great Plains that means rich grasslands, moderate supplies of water above and below ground, and nonrenewable or finite energy resources—coal, gas, and petroleum. What a society does in such a place is strongly influenced by its culture. A people will do what it has done in the past, if it can. But it will change if it must.

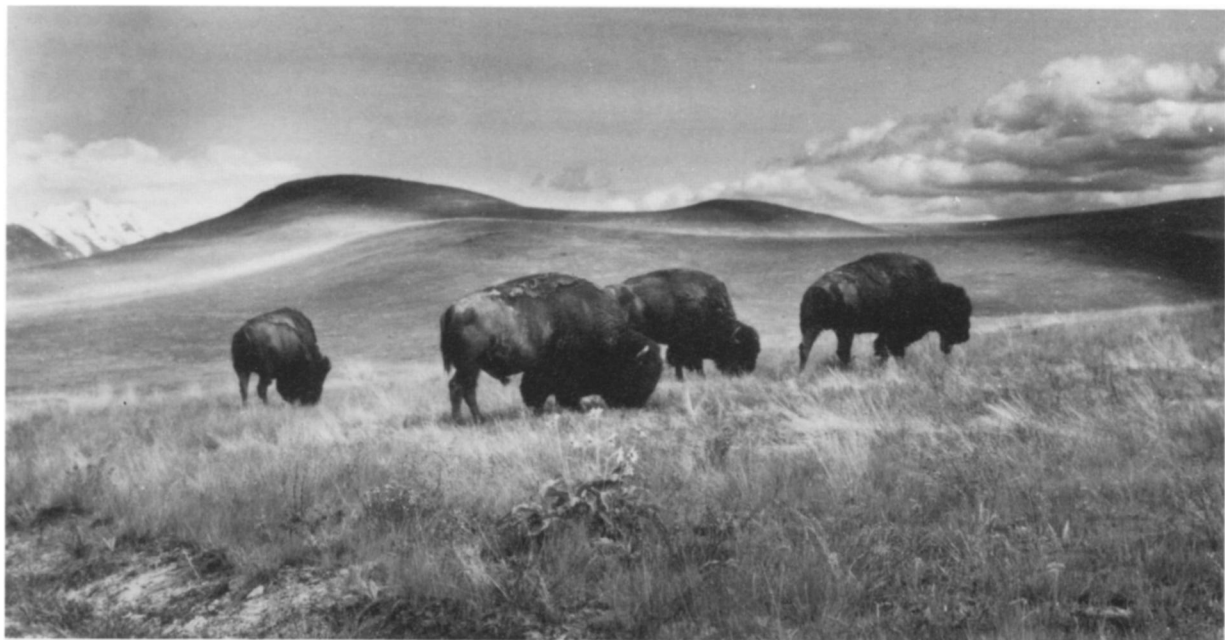
What permits a society to transcend environmental limitations is its technology. The various Indian tribes who occupied the plains possessed cultures that were complex but not technologically advanced; when they migrated onto the plains they had little choice but to live in harmony with the

1. Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust, A Daring Proposal for Dealing with an Inevitable Disaster,” *Planning*, December 1987, 12-18. In response to a request from the *Washington Post*, the Poppers offered another version that has been reprinted, for example, in the *Rapid City Journal*, August 12, 1989. Deborah Popper is a graduate student in geography; Frank Popper chairs the urban studies department in Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

2. The Popper article provides an instructive example of what can happen when a brief rehash of well-known facts, hitched to a simplistic solution, attracts the attention of the press. For a survey of public responses it evoked in the media and elsewhere, see Ruth Knack, “The Poppers Strike a Nerve,” *Planning*, May 1990, 20-22. Useful and balanced articles on the Great Plains appeared, for example, in the *Wall Street Journal*, August 16, 1989, and *New York Times*, January 3, 1990. Other pieces focused on the centennial of the “omnibus

states” and incorporated references to the Popper article. See *Newsweek*, October 9, 1989, 76-80. Many daily newspapers in the plains region have reported or editorialized on the Popper proposal. Sample responses are the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), April 24, 1990; *Bismarck Tribune*, April 25, 1990; *Sunday Omaha World-Herald*, August 20, 1989; *Lincoln Star*, August 21, 1989; *Des Moines Sunday Register*, April 29, 1990.

3. Ian Frazier, *Great Plains* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989).



U. S. Fish and Wildlife

**Unsure of the future, some people advocate returning large portions of the Great Plains to a vast buffalo range similar to National Bison Range near Moiese in northwestern Montana, shown above.**

environment, as their culture dictated. When Euramericans (whose culture led them to think of conquering nature) entered the region, as Walter Prescott Webb argued in his *The Great Plains* (1931), they failed until they developed the technology—railroads, barbed wire, windmills, and the like—that permitted them to compensate for the region's limited water supplies and lack of trees. And so the Great Plains region—the last American frontier—was settled, mostly in the 1870s and 1880s, but the process continued in some areas until roughly 1920.

Because technology has expanded so dramatically the possibilities of what can be done to transcend environmental limitations in recent years, the boundaries of appropriate human behavior in this place are not well understood. One might even argue that the history of the Great Plains has been a search for those limits. The region is thus enmeshed in economic, political, and social uncertainty. This is the heart of the problem of the Great Plains.

Consider the impact of

technology on agricultural productivity in the Great Plains. New machinery, chemical fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides, and additives to animal feeds (including growth hormones and antibiotics), plus the development of center-pivot irrigation, have combined to increase crop and animal production far beyond the present capacity of world markets to consume. Farm prices drop accordingly.

Meanwhile the federal government, recognizing the necessity of sustaining food production in a world of international tensions and exploding population, has subsidized agricultural production on a massive scale. Government policies of supporting prices, buying up surpluses, sponsoring domestic and foreign giveaway programs, and paying farmers not to farm have only made the problem worse, at least partly because these well-intentioned measures have tended to favor big producers rather than small ones.

The results have been devastating to rural economic and social structures. Farms and

ranches have increased dramatically in size and decreased just as dramatically in number.<sup>4</sup> The number of persons gainfully employed in agriculture has dropped in some states to about 7 percent of the labor force, even though agriculture unquestionably remains the foundation of the economy. Out-migration of the young (who contribute the most to community vigor) from rural counties has continued at a staggering rate, raising the average age in many such places to forty-five (compared to a national figure of thirty). But some of the elderly also leave, often to less rigorous climates. Those who do are among those who can afford it, and they leave behind those who are the most economically dependent.

Plainsfolk have been leaving the farm ever since the 1890s. One county in the Nebraska panhandle, for example, was organized in 1888

4. In North Dakota, the average size of farms has increased threefold in fifty years from 480 acres to about 1,280, as the number of people living on farms has dropped from four-hundred thousand to barely one-hundred thousand today, David B. Danbom, "The Future of Agriculture in North Dakota," *North Dakota History*, 56 (Winter 1989), 33, 35.



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, F. Jay Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS

**For more than a century, wet years have alternated with drought to produce abundance, such as the 1877 wheat harvest in the Red River valley (above), as well as hardship and political radicalism.**

by farmers who ignored physiographic realities and farmed as they had farther east. Two years later this county, optimistically named Banner, attained its highest decennial population—2,435 persons. Decline began with the drought of the 1890s. By 1980 the number of its inhabitants had dwindled to 867; its only town, the county seat, is unincorporated. Banner is not an exceptional case. Nearly one-fourth of Nebraska's ninety-three counties have fewer than half the inhabitants they had in their peak year. Similarly, eighteen of North Dakota's fifty-three counties have lost half or more of their population between 1930 and 1988. Other Great Plains states can tell similar stories.

All this in a region of economic dependency. The economy of the Great Plains has always been based on the production of raw materials—wheat, corn, grain sorghums, and animal products plus coal, oil, and natural gas. This means exploitative arrangements by which raw materials are produced for use elsewhere. It also means that the people of the plains have

little control over markets and prices; they are dependent on outsiders for capital, services, and subsidies, all of which lead to per capita income figures that are regularly below the national average.

Economic dependency, of course, is not a new situation for the region. Farmers of the plains have understood these relationships since the era of agrarian radicalism in the 1890s. They have periodically returned to such political remedies, especially with the Non-Partisan League in the World War I era and the Farm Holiday Movement of the early 1930s. But since then there has been a shift in the locus of dependency. The Populist bestiary was dominated by Wall Street bankers and railroad magnates, but since the destitute 1930s and the prosperous 1940s their places have been taken by Washington politicians and bureaucrats. Today government payments to farmers account for approximately 60 percent of agricultural income in the Great Plains region.

The last twenty years illustrate the dependency of the plains

economy on the course of world events combined with the vicissitudes of climate. Farm income was down in the late 1960s when drought struck the Soviet Union. The Nixon administration happily negotiated the sale of Great Plains wheat, which affected the plains economy like a shot of adrenalin. Farm income spiraled upward in the wheat-producing states. This coincided with the energy crisis of the 1970s, which stimulated an enormous increase in the production of Great Plains coal and petroleum. The flash of prosperity produced new revenues along with new debts for building needed schools, roads, bridges, and water supplies. Then, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter responded with an embargo on grain sales.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the oil glut of the 1980s. Prosperity vanished, but taxes remained high.

The consequences of these trends have been devastating to the

5. In North Dakota, income dropped from \$721 million in 1975 to \$88.6 million in 1980. D. Jerome Tweton, "The Future of North Dakota: An Overview," *North Dakota History*, 56 (Winter 1989), 7-8.



F. Jay Haynes, photographer. F. Jay Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS

**Technology has made the Great Plains ever more productive, from irrigation along the Yellowstone River in 1894 to new machinery, chemical fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides, and growth hormones for livestock.**

towns of the sparsely populated plains. Already transformed by the automobile, small rural communities deteriorate as larger towns and cities—usually those of at least ten thousand inhabitants—capture regional trade and services, as well as dislocated rural people. Railroad connections are torn up and bus lines are discontinued. Deregulated airfares penalize the rural poor for the benefit of the urban rich. Churches close, and schools consolidate. Social organizations languish. The services of local government are strained as revenues fall. Inefficiencies abound as voters refuse to add to their tax burdens.

Such descriptions lead analysts such as Deborah and Frank Popper to conclude that the only sensible plan is to return much of the plains to the public domain. Because government subsidies have led to overstressing land and water

6. People of the plains are especially offended by the Poppers' sweeping judgment that Euramerican occupation of the Great Plains has been the "largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history," Popper and Popper, "The Great Plains from Dust to Dust," 12.

resources and to intensifying Great Plains problems, the Poppers advise that tax monies should be redirected to create huge grassland preserves where buffalo may roam and antelope may play.<sup>6</sup> One may assume that the Popper proposition would enhance tourism; prairie entrepreneurs could organize grassland safaris for rich men of the East—modern equivalents of Grand Duke Alexis of Russia—who might happily slaughter revitalized bison herds.

The trouble with the Popper proposition is that it is myopic. It fails to identify the problems of the Great Plains as regional manifestations of an economic restructuring process that is national and international in scope. As Joseph Luther has pointed out, it is based on outmoded paradigms that limit the analysis of community

7. Joseph Luther, "The Future of the Great Plains: A Sustainable Vision," paper delivered to a conference of the American Planning Association in Denver, April 23, 1990.

8. It is worth remembering that the semi-arid plains of northern China support a population of 200 million, though not in the manner to which Americans have become accustomed.

viability to the contexts of agriculture, farm market centers, and obsolescent technologies of transportation and communication. But rural and small-town economies, like those of the nation's huge metropolitan centers, are experiencing rapid and far-reaching changes that alter the potentialities of all trade areas, urban as well as rural.<sup>7</sup>

Agriculture will and should continue, of course, to be the foundation of the Great Plains economy, though its importance will diminish. Given the anticipated growth of the world's population in the next century, it would be folly to phase out agriculture.<sup>8</sup> But agriculture as practiced during the past thirty years is likely to change and government policies must follow suit, recognizing that it is more important to sustain long-term agricultural production than to favor the development of large-scale operations. "Sustainability" thus means concern for the composition of soils and retention of nutrients; it

9. See the article by syndicated columnist Neal Peirce, *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, February 7, 1988.



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, F. Jay Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS

**The Northern Pacific, and railroad companies like it, encouraged agricultural settlement in many ways, including editorial excursion parties like this one in Dakota Territory in 1878.**

means new patterns of crop rotation, water conservation, and reductions in the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides; and it also means new crops such as the seed-bearing grasses being developed by Wes Jackson at the Land Institute of Salina, Kansas.

There are other possibilities for economic restructuring, but not according to old models of industrial development. Some are offered by telecommunication and computer technologies, which transcend the old limitations imposed by the vast spaces of the plains. Broken Bow, located in the eastern reaches of Nebraska's Sand Hills, is an example of a small town revitalized by a telemarketing operation.<sup>9</sup> Sioux Falls, South Dakota, has capitalized on a relaxation of state usury laws to exploit the credit card business. And when Americans dial an 800 number, they are often greeted by someone living in Omaha, Nebraska.

Other nonagricultural business activities thrive in plains states.<sup>10</sup> Insurance has been big business in Omaha and Lincoln for many years. Tourism, which the Poppers regard

10. Steven Kale, "Industrial Development Trends in the Northern Plains States," in Merlin Lawson and Maurice Baker, eds., *The Great Plains: Perspectives and Prospects* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln/Center for Great Plains Studies, 1981), 205-19.

as unpromising, presently ranks behind agriculture and manufacturing as the third largest economic sector in Nebraska, rarely regarded as a vacation spot by anyone outside the state.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, changes in transportation systems have shifted food-processing industries to small communities on the plains (along with many knotty urban-type problems). Meat-packing plants have relocated from old centers of the industry like Chicago to small towns and cities near huge feedlots on the plains. Still, one should not expect much industrial development in our postindustrial times. Nor will plains people welcome the sticky social and political problems that normally accompany such changes.

Most prognoses of the future of the Great Plains seem uninformed by rural sociology or, to put it another way, they seem based on assumptions about human behavior drawn from urban experience. But people who live in sparsely populated regions often interact differently. Rural sociologists tell us that they have a keener sense of community, they volunteer more, they respond to calls for help. They even trust strangers more than do

11. *Nebraska Statistical Handbook*, 1988-1990 (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Economic Development, n.d.), 275.

people living in big cities.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, cooperation between town and countryside is greater today than formerly when, before the automobile and electricity, there were sharp contrasts in the quality of life. This translates into greater political power.

Family bonds also seem to be more powerful in lightly peopled places. Many plains communities, sociologist J. Patrick Smith reminds us, consist of interrelated families who help each other in adversity. Even the meaning of the highly publicized data about increasing farm size is modified when one realizes that farm consolidations are often based on sales or leases of land to siblings or other relatives, often at reduced rates, in order to prevent ownership by outsiders.<sup>13</sup>

Such solidarity is enhanced by ethnicity, which is usually linked with uniformity of religious belief. The northern Great Plains remain a quilt work of ethnic patches; the descendants of the immigrants who broke the sod a century ago remain there today. Few urbanologists know that at the onset of this century North Dakota had the highest proportion of foreign-born persons of any state in the Union.<sup>14</sup>

12. See J. Patrick Smith, "North Dakota's Prairie Communities: The Journey from Twilight to a Dawn," *North Dakota History*, 56 (Winter 1989), 49-56.



Used courtesy of Mutual of Omaha Insurance Company

**Omaha and other Great Plains population centers boast low crime and unemployment rates and high satisfaction with the quality of life.**

In recent years immigrants from Mexico have invigorated many rural places in the southern plains that were approaching ghost-town status, and they are returning to dryland farming operations. All this suggests that, at best, social and economic data about the Great Plains gathered at the county level and processed by computers in distant places reveal only partial truths.

It is not my purpose to suggest that the Great Plains may anticipate a rosy future or that the region's problems are easily resolved. I subscribe to a dynamic rather than

a progressive view of history. History is the record of change, but not necessarily for the better. Actually, it appears that certain adverse economic and demographic trends in the Great Plains are likely to continue for some time. That does not mean that people will be less happy. But long before this place becomes the Poppers' Buffalo Commons, the people of this region, like those of other places experiencing economic and social stress (including New Jersey's Camden and Newark and similarly blighted cities in other states), will respond to new forces and new

leaders who will identify and exploit new opportunities to cope with old problems of community survival.

The people of the Great Plains like their region. They cherish their clean air, good schools, parks, and playgrounds. Their crime rates are much lower than those of other regions. Their unemployment rates are among the lowest in the country. They reveal higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of their lives than do Americans living in other regions.<sup>15</sup> For them the plains are great.

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13. Ibid., 51.

14. See William C. Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983); and Frederick C. Luebke, introduction, *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), xviii.

15. This statement is based on data supplied to me by J. Allen Williams, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, but see Dean S. Rugg and Donald C. Rundquist, "Urbanization in the Great Plains: Trends and Prospects," in Lawson and Baker, eds., *The Great Plains*, 233-37.